

A Walk through the Speculative Music Section

A library is a silent place. Whatever music is heard there comes from the subliminal tunes that haunt our brains, or from the scores that musicians read, as others read books. This is not a library of scores, but it is rich in evidence of another kind of unheard music, which ancient philosophers deemed the highest of all. We may call it Speculative Music, for it serves as a mirror (*speculum*) that reflects some extra-musical order, usually mathematical or cosmological.

Like alchemy, speculative music is both science and art, and deals with both material and immaterial realities. Spiritual alchemy has its physical correlate in chemistry and laboratory work, speculative music in the physics of sound and the practical music of voices and instruments. Both disciplines comprise a way of understanding the cosmic order, based on the doctrine of correspondences, and a way of transformation for the individual.

Open the first volume of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi ... Historia*, and you will see images that defined speculative music for the early modern imagination. One is the *monochordum mundi*, the cosmic monochord. Its single string joins earth to heaven, where the hand of God controls its tuning peg. The spheres of the elements, planets, and fixed stars, which symbolize the hierarchy of states of being, divide it into tones and semitones. The whole makes a scale (*scala* = ladder) by which the divine influx descends and the human soul ascends. In another of Fludd's illustrations, the monochord string is superimposed on a human figure, for in his Hermetic philosophy, Man is a microcosm. As the measure of all things, he contains all the tones or states of being in potentiality. So here are the two complementary pillars of speculative music: *musica mundana* or the Harmony of the Spheres, and *musica humana*, the harmony of soul and body.

From the same Rosicrucian circles of the early seventeenth century comes the *Atalanta Fugiens* of Michael Maier. Every lover of alchemy recognizes the fifty engravings, complemented by fifty discourses and fifty fugues. While in the original book the music was printed in separate parts, which makes mental reading almost impossible, we find here the modern editions which translate the text and transcribe the music. Maier's music is more symbolic than speculative. His three-voiced fugues (rightly, canons) represent the princess Atalanta running ahead of her suitor Hippomenes. By the end of each fugue he will have caught

Among their contemporaries were two figures overlooked by academic historians of ideas: Fabre d'Olivet and Johann Friedrich Hugo von Dalberg. Fabre d'Olivet was one of the forerunners of the French occult revival; Dalberg, the first (as early as 1787) to articulate the Romantic view of musical spirituality. These two seem almost to have been twin souls in their shared talents and enthusiasms, for both were composers, acoustic experimenters, musical theorists in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, political thinkers, novelists, translators, orientalists, mythographers, and disillusioned enthusiasts for the French Revolution. Dalberg's allegorical dreams *Blicke eines Tonkünstlers in die Musik der Geister* and *Polyhymnia*, his treatise *Untersuchungen über den Ursprung der Harmonie und ihre allmähliche Ausbildung*, and his augmented translation of Sir William Jones's *On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos* contain the whole Romantic philosophy of music, globalize it, and moreover root it in acoustic reality. The same is true of Fabre d'Olivet's unfinished book on music, later edited as *La musique expliquée comme science et comme art et considérée dans ses rapports analogiques avec les mystères religieux, la mythologie ancienne et l'histoire de la terre*.

Saint-Yves d'Alveydre shared many talents and interests with Fabre d'Olivet, onto whose work he grafted his own, supposedly amending and de-paganizing it. He, too, never completed his book on music, though he filled notebooks with his studies of ancient Greek theory and his own mediumistic revelations. The result was the *Archéomètre*, published in two posthumous versions, one under René Guénon's influence, the other by Papus. The *Archéomètre* is a geometrical diagram accompanied by charts, tables, and historical explanations, which integrates tones and colors with the planets, the signs of the zodiac, the divine Names, and the letters of Hebrew, Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian, and the otherwise unknown Vattanian alphabet. At its heart is the union of the male and female principles, which the Catholic author represented by Jesus and Mary. The *Archéomètre* was supposed to furnish material for scientists and artists, so that by using proper correspondences they could harmonize their work with this god-given order. Saint-Yves realized it in his own *Archéomètre musical*: 201 short piano pieces illustrating the seven "sacred modes" of the planets in permutation with all the diatonic intervals, the latter given names expressive of their emotional content.

Rudolf Steiner's musical writings did not rest on such an intricate theoretical foundation as Saint-Yves', but he likewise emphasized the diatonic intervals as carriers of meaning. In his lectures on music (collected as *Das Wesen des Musikalischen*), Steiner integrated these into his neo-Theosophical scheme of prehistoric root-races. He believed that in the course of evolution from the Lemurian Era to the present, humans became able to perceive progressively smaller intervals, each one in turn conveying a specific spiritual content. Steiner also

up with her, thanks to the Golden Apples (here represented by a plainsong *cantus firmus*) which he threw in her path, and the couple will be united in a Chemical Wedding. Such is the case in every musical work that depends for its effects on polyphony and the interplay of consonance and dissonance.

Johannes Kepler, in his tireless efforts to tabulate the planetary motions and discover their mathematical rationale, arrived at a more literal version of the cosmic harmony. In his late work, *Harmonices Mundi*, he published laws of planetary motion that earned him a permanent place in the scientific pantheon. More important to him, though, was the discovery of the real reason that the planets move in elliptical orbits: it is so that each can have a "song," its ambitus set by the difference between its speeds at aphelion and perihelion. Set in motion at the Creation with a perfect concord, the planetary choir now performs an ever-changing polyphony, and when it returns to that concord, Kepler thought, the world may end.

The great volume of Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia Universalis* closes the era that began with Boethius (if not with Pythagoras), in which speculative music was taken seriously as a key to the cosmic order. Here too the engravings make a running commentary on the text, and serve the impatient or Latin-less reader as a summary of the whole. They show the music of birds, human music, the phenomenon of echoes, and all manner of instruments. Towards the end Kircher takes flight with a treatise on the music of the planets and the angels. He shows in notation how the malefic planets, Mars and Saturn, furnish the dissonances without which the cosmic music would be incomplete. Finally his quirky imagination pictures the Six Days of Creation as a baroque organ. Each rank of pipes represents the work of one day, God being the invisible organist. Obeying the Doctrine of Correspondences, which Kircher was almost the last scientist to take seriously, each day's creation harmonizes with all the others.

The Scientific Revolution banished speculative music to the fringes of the intellectual world, where it has remained to this day. Long after Kircher, the theosopher Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin revived the idea of consonance and dissonance as allegories of good and evil. In his *Des erreurs et de la vérité* he suggested theological meanings for the triad and the scale, giving voice to something that practical musicians such as J. S. Bach had been doing instinctively all along, namely attaching moral and theological meanings to musical configurations. A few years later, nascent Romanticism changed the key of speculative music to one more poetic and philosophical than scientific. To study it in this library, we need only go to the Literature and Philosophy shelves. For Novalis, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Wackenroder, and Arthur Schopenhauer, wordless instrumental music seemed the purest of all art forms. That this idea flourished in the era of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven is one of the unsurprising synchronicities of history.

wrote about the music that is heard in higher worlds, and put forth the wonderful idea that in sleep, we all visit those worlds and hear their music, only to forget it when we wake up. The great composers are those who preserve some memory of it and are able to make it partially audible in the physical world. Its emotional power over us is due to its stirring of those memories, not only of sleep but of the state between incarnations which, according to Steiner, we spend in such worlds.

Another neo-Theosophist, Cyril Scott, was an accomplished composer, and responsible for a lastingly popular book on the esoteric aspects of music: *Music: Its Occult Influence and Healing Value*. Scott's thesis is that music influences human society, but to say that Handel's music caused the conventional morality of the Georgian age, or that Schumann's caused the Victorian sympathy for children rests on so many unexamined presumptions as to make the idea seem ludicrous. We still await a proper study of music as reflecting the *Zeitgeist* and reinforcing the dominant *égregores* of a given society.

The normal listener's aversion to atonal or twelve-tone compositions does not surprise the speculative musician, for with one accord our sources accept the physical and psychological primacy of the harmonic series. Given by the laws of physics and ultimately by the series of whole numbers, this series causes us to hear the intervals as a hierarchy from perfect consonance to extreme dissonance. To make music only with the latter forfeits the resource, already mentioned, that has been the mainstay of Western music since the Middle Ages. Hans Kayser, the most thorough-going Pythagorean of the twentieth century, made the harmonic series the basis for his polymathic treatises on music, history, architecture, botany, anatomy, theology, and metaphysics. In his *Lehrbuch der Harmonik* he shows how they all rest on that phenomenon, which guarantees the essentially harmonic (and potentially harmonious) condition of the universe. After Kayser's death, an institute for Harmonic research was founded in Vienna (formerly Hans-Kayser Institut, now Internationales Harmonik Zentrum, at the Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst), whose director, Rudolf Haase, took Harmonic theory in new directions, especially music therapy and updating its relationship to the sciences. The library contains, besides Kayser's and Haase's works, the rare *Mitteilungen: Kreis der Freunde von Hans Kayser*.

Lastly I must mention two works of speculative music whose difficulty has placed them, in effect, beyond criticism. One is *El origen musical de los animales simbolos en la mitologia y la escultura antiguas* by Marius Schneider, one of the founders of the discipline of ethnomusicology. Unlike the *Privatgelährter* Kayser, Schneider had academic posts in Germany and Spain, but his principal work is more eccentric than anything in the Harmonic literature. His study of the Vedas persuaded him that in prehistoric times (he calls it the "megalithic era"), tones were identified with the cries of various animals. These animals were then identified with the signs of the zodiac, giving rise to not one but three "tone-

zodiacs,” Solar, Lunar, and Earthly. On this dubious foundation, Schneider built a musical-symbolic complex ranging over comparative mythology, the Chinese tonal system, Romanesque architecture, the Tarantella, and the Sword-Dance, with a quasi-Jungian subtext of the Hero and his destiny.

The other work, by Albert von Thimus, was Hans Kayser’s inspiration for his own, much more comprehensible work on Harmonics. Thimus’s *Das harmonikale Symbolik des Alterthums* is a monstrosity of erudition, drawing on Hebrew, Chinese, and Egyptian hieroglyphics as well as on the entirety of the Graeco-Latin canon. Its primary demonstration, which Kayser would take to heart, is the ancients’ knowledge of the “Lambdoma” diagram as a chart of harmonics and sub-harmonics. That the latter are inaudible makes no difference to their speculative value; in fact, they provide the mirroring effect that is so metaphysically desirable to this way of thinking: As above, so below.



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